

## Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Ex-Offenders: A Survey of Idaho Employers

Wholesale traders and manufacturers are more likely than their counterparts in most other industries to hire ex-prison inmates, and nearly all potential employers place high value on showing up for work on time, putting in a full day for a full-day's pay and being principled when they consider hiring an ex-convict, according to a new report.

The report, issued by Idaho Commerce & Labor, also found that the job-search success of ex-felons is closely linked to economic conditions — jobs are much easier to come by in a strong economy than they are in a weakening one.

In late 2005, a multi-agency research effort was launched to measure how receptive Idaho employers are to hiring ex-offenders — individuals that have been incarcerated or have criminal records. The participating agencies were the Idaho State Police, the Idaho Department of Correction in coordination with the Division of Correctional Industries and Idaho Commerce & Labor.

Using a mail survey from an industry stratified random sample of employers, the collaborators sought insight into how to increase an offender's chance of being hired upon release from prison. Survey questions pertained to what occupations employers would consider hiring an ex-offender to perform, the ex-offender's level of skills and whether a federal bonding program would influence the hiring decision.

The last section of the survey solicited suggestions from employers on how ex-offenders could increase their chances of being hired. A total of 922 surveys were sent to employers throughout Idaho. However, 85 employers were found to be ineligible for participation in the study for several reasons including business relocation or closure. The response rate

was 29 percent. There was no further follow up. The findings represent statistical significance with 95 percent confidence and a margin of error of  $\pm 6.3$  points.

**Importance of skills.** Employers were asked to rate the importance of 10 skills to their organization. The majority, more than 90 percent, indicate it is important for an employee to be to work on time and be an ethical, hard-working team player. From the rest of the skills listed in FYI Table 1, employers indicate the least important involves written communication skills.

One skill or attribute not identified on the list but that employers cite as important in the suggestions section is **personal appearance**. Of the 121 respondents who made suggestions on what would increase an ex-offender's chances of being hired, 24 percent suggest looking clean and neat. Fourteen percent cite honesty as an important attribute, 8 percent a good work ethic and 5 percent dependability. Other suggestions include being properly trained, learning interview skills, regular drug testing and the exercise of close supervision by authorities.

The survey solicited information on whether the employer would consider hiring an ex-offender in each of 31 areas where vocational programs are currently offered or under consideration at correctional facility schools throughout Idaho. The majority of employer respondents indicate their company would consider hiring an ex-offender for most positions applicable to their industry. About three of every four employers indicate their company would consider hiring an ex-offender in at least one of the 31 job categories. About one in four employers indicate they would not consider hiring an ex-offender.

FYI Table 1: Level of Importance for Employee's Skills

Skill	Sample Size	Not Important %	Neutral %	Important %
Being on Time to Work	238	0.8	-	99.2
Full Day's Work for a Full Day's Pay	238	0.8	0.8	98.3
Ethical	236	0.8	2.1	97.0
Politeness	239	2.5	3.8	93.7
Team Player	239	0.8	7.5	91.6
Loyalty to the Company	237	1.3	8.4	90.3
Friendliness	238	2.1	10.1	87.8
Oral Communication Skills	239	1.7	11.3	87.0
Professional Language	239	3.3	13.0	83.7
Written Communication Skills	235	6.8	26.0	67.2

**Job categories.** FYI Table 2 lists job categories for which employers would consider hiring an ex-offender. Welding is the most promising occupation at 86.8 percent, small engine repair at 80.8 percent and landscaping at 79.3 percent. Other occupations with relatively high hiring potential are in the construction industry such as laborers and floor covering installers, manufacturing, warehousing, transportation and maintenance-related industries.

The occupations employers are least likely to hire ex-offenders for are in clothing production at 42.9 percent, video/media producer at 36.8 percent and library clerk and literacy tutor, both at zero. A group of employers were purposely excluded from the survey given the presumed inability, legal or otherwise, to hire ex-offenders. This group included schools, medical and veterinary services, pharmaceuticals, banking, security and child care centers.

**Jobs by industry.** Employers from the wholesale trade industry are more likely to consider hiring ex-offenders for

at least one job category. Organizations in the professional, scientific and technical services sector, detailed in FYI Table 3 on page 23, are the least likely to consider hiring an ex-offender for any job listed. The expectations from potential employees in this industry are based on higher skills or experience attained through formal education.

**Job outlook.** Two elements are necessary for an occupation to be favorable for ex-offenders — an employer's willingness to hire and the outlook for the job.

An employer's willingness to hire is measured in FYI Tables 1 through 3 while specific job outlooks are described further in this article. The job outlook complements the employer's willingness to hire ex-offenders. After release, ex-offenders may find that good jobs for which they were trained are no longer available for a variety of reasons, including those directly related to the strength of the economy — low turnover or low job growth.

FYI Table 2: Would Consider Hiring an Ex-Offender for Each Job Category

Occupations	Survey Sample	Would Hire Ex-Offenders?	% Employers Would Hire Ex-Offenders
<b>Trade &amp; Industry</b>			
Welding	68	59	86.8
Small Engine Repair	26	21	80.8
Carpentry	35	27	77.1
Plumbing	26	20	76.9
Building Maintenance	79	60	75.9
Commercial Driving	58	43	74.1
Framing	19	14	73.7
Electrical Wiring	31	21	67.7
Commercial Cleaning	40	27	67.5
Launderer	11	7	63.6
Drywalling	14	8	57.1
Cabinetry	35	15	42.9
Clothing Production (manufacturing)	7	3	42.9
<b>Horticulture</b>			
Landscaping	29	23	79.3
Master Gardener	11	6	54.5
<b>Computer-Related</b>			
General Office Clerk	126	76	60.3
Data Entry Specialist	88	53	60.2
Data Entry Specialist	95	57	60.0
General Office Clerk	123	71	57.7
Call Center Receptionist	42	24	57.1
Computer Support/Repair	76	43	56.6
Secretary/Admin Asst.	116	63	54.3
Video/Media Producer	116	63	54.3
Desktop Publisher	44	23	52.3
<b>Hospitality</b>			
Hotel/Restaurant Customer Service	26	20	76.9
Food Service--Cook	27	20	74.1
Food Service--Dishwasher	21	15	71.4
Food Service--Preparer	24	17	70.8
Tourism	12	8	66.7
<b>Other</b>			
Library Clerk	5	0	0.0
Literacy Tutor	6	0	0.0

FYI Table 3: Industry Sector and Willingness to Consider Hiring an Ex-Offender

Industry Sector	Survey Sample	Would Hire Ex-Offenders?	% Employers Would Hire Ex-Offenders
Wholesale Trade	20	18	90.0
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	9	8	88.9
Other Services (except Public Administration)	23	20	87.0
Manufacturing	51	44	86.3
Accommodation and Food Services	7	6	85.7
Administrative & Support & Waste Management & Remediation	12	10	83.3
Construction	32	26	81.3
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	8	6	75.0
Retail Trade	29	21	72.4
Transportation and Warehousing	9	6	66.7
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	25	12	48.0
Educational Services	2	---	---
Health Care and Social Assistance	4	---	---
Information	4	---	---
Utilities	1	---	---
All Industries	236	188	79.7
--- very small sample size			

Trade occupations are most favorable to ex-offenders — building maintenance and construction, welding and commercial driving. The term favorable is defined as the willingness of at least 70 percent of employers who have the occupation to hire an ex-offender if the outlook is good for that job.

The entry wage for building maintenance workers, janitors and cleaners is \$6.84 an hour with an average wage of \$9.49. The outlook for building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations is expected to grow about as fast as the average growth rate for all jobs through 2010.

An entry level welder can expect to earn \$10.63 an hour. The average wage for this type of work is \$14.97 an hour. Current demand for welders, solderers and brazers and the anticipated strong growth for the next few years make the job prospects for these occupations excellent for skilled workers.

Job opportunities are also positive for commercial driving occupations. These occupations are amongst the occupations with larger number of job openings each year, both from industry growth and from turnover. An entry level worker driving heavy trucks or tractor-trailers can expect to earn \$9.67 an hour. The average wage for this job is \$14.41 an hour.

A general office clerk is the only position not in the trade and industry group for which prospects for ex-offenders are favorable. Even with employers about evenly split on hiring ex-offenders, these jobs experience high turnover and are

expected to grow at about the same rate as all occupations through 2010. While this is an entry-level administrative support position, familiarity with office equipment, basic computer skills and typing skills give potential employees an advantage. The entry wage for this position is \$8.12 an hour with an average wage of \$11.66 an hour.

Small engine repair, electrical wiring, drywalling, other office-related occupations, clothing production and laundering offer the least favorable job outlook for ex-offenders. In general, employers in these occupations indicate they would consider hiring ex-offenders, but the potential for ex-offenders to actually find employment is reduced because the pool of employers in these occupations is so small or these occupations are traditionally managed under subcontracts or self employment. FYI Table 4 on page 24 provides a detailed outlook for some other specific occupations.

Most occupations in the hospitality sector offer ex-offenders the most favorable employment opportunities given the large pool of employers, but these occupations also represent the low end of the wage scale.

**Additional occupations.** About half the survey respondents wrote in the “other occupations section” that they would consider hiring ex-offenders mostly in construction-related trades, sales, manufacturing, warehousing, animal care and as general laborers, machinists, housekeepers, farm workers, drivers, mechanics and painters.

**Federal bonding.** The availability of a bonding program offered by the federal government did not increase a re-

FYI Table 4. Other Occupations, Availability, Hiring Potential and Wage Outlook

Occupation Group	Entry Wage \$/Hr	Average Wage \$/Hr	% Growth Rate	Annual New Jobs	Job Availability	Hiring Potential	Wage Level
All occupations-statewide			2.3	29,377			
Framing/Construction Carpentry	10.26	16.19	3.0	234	High	High	Good
Small Engine Repair	9.46	11.92	2.0	9	Low	High	Good
Plumbing (Helper)	8.29	11.37	3.3	36	Low	High	Good
Electrical Wiring (Helper)	9.17	13.45	4.2	9	Low	High	Good
Data Entry Specialist	8.11	12.23	0.4	22	Low	Low	Good
Secretary	6.99	10.73	1.7	221	High	Low	Good
Sr. Secretary/Admin Asst.	10.75	14.81	0.7	181	High	Low	Good
Video/Media Producer*	6.33	13.34	2.0	116	Low	Low	Good
Computer Support	13.42	18.97	3.2	109	Low	Low	Good
Computer Repair	11.66	16.27	2.2	18	Low	Low	Good
Food Service—Cook/Food Preparer	6.36	8.45	1.9	141	High	High	Low
Hotel/Restaurant Customer Service							
--- Food & Beverage Servers	6.03	6.94	2.8	687	High	High	Low
--- Hotel Clerks	6.56	8.15	2.1	71	Low	Low	Low
* Media & Communication Equipment Workers							

spondent's willingness to consider hiring an ex-offender. A flier with information on federal bonding at no cost to the employer was attached to the survey. Seventy-five percent of employers responded they would consider hiring an ex-offender if a bonding program were available and 25 percent said they would not.

Employers from southeastern Idaho seemed most likely to hire ex-offenders if federal bonding is available in industries such as arts, recreation, accommodation and food services, manufacturing, services and wholesale and retail trade. Employers from southwestern Idaho would consider the use of federal bonding mainly in mining, construction and services. The east central employers would consider hiring with federal bonding in services and manufacturing but not in arts, recreation or food services. Employers in northern Idaho are the least likely to use federal bonding to hire ex-offenders in all but the services industry.

The idea of federal bonding is better received by respondents whose firms employ fewer than 50 employees. Overall, firms employing more than 500 employees were generally more receptive to the idea of hiring ex-offenders without the use of federal bonding than were smaller firms.

**Impact of Idaho's economy and survey results.** Survey results indicate a high disposition on the part of Idaho employers to hire ex-offenders. As Idaho's economy continues to grow and the need for workers increases, labor shortages may occur in high demand occupations and ex-offenders may become a more suitable labor pool. As the economy slows down and the demand for workers decreases, the results from this survey may not reflect the same disposition toward hiring ex-offenders. Consequently, to further explore how receptive an employer is to hire ex-offenders, additional study is needed when the pool of potential workers increases and employers have labor force options.

We recommend replicating this study in a few months if and when unemployment rates start going up to determine the type of occupations favorable to ex-offenders and the type of training they need to be hired during weakening economic times.

#### TASKS BY AGENCY

- **Survey instrument:** Idaho Department of Corrections and Division of Correctional Industries
- **Survey administration:** Idaho Commerce & Labor
- **Data entry and quality control:** Idaho State Police
- **Analysis and final report:** Idaho State Police and Idaho Commerce & Labor

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